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ABSTRACT

The history of left-handedness can provide teachers and parents a better understanding of left-handed children and give those children more pride in their difference. No child should be made to feel that he or she is abnormal because of using the left hand, although some specific instruction for these students is necessary in handwriting. Many books contain fascinating stories, facts, and figures about the quirks of being a "lefty," but once there were many biases against left-handers. In recent years such extreme bias has disappeared, in part because research has shown that most people have some degree of left preference. About 10% of Americans are left-handed (9.7% of boys and 12.5% of girls). Many famous left-handed people include American President Bill Clinton, Ringo Starr, Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Babe Ruth. (Contains 12 references.) (CR)

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The Left-Handed: "Their Sinister" History

Elaine Fowler Costas

Introduction

The presidential election of 1996 has proceeded along much as others have in the past. However, the presidential election of 1992 was unusual for many reasons, one reason being that all three major candidates--George Bush, Bill Clinton and Ross Perot-- were left-handed. They joined the ranks of other famous lefties such as Harry Truman, Ringo Starr, Carol Burnett, Judy Garland, Julius Caesar, Prince Charles, Goldie Hawn, Caroline Kennedy, Babe Ruth, and Leonardo da Vinci to mention a few.

The history of left-handedness is long and diverse. Although it has not always been a pleasant story, it has always been interesting. Reporting this history can provide teachers and parents a better understanding of left-handed students and give left-handed children more pride in their difference. No child should be made to feel that he is abnormal because he uses his left hand. It should be enough that he must live in a right-handed world where bottle tops and pencil sharpeners forever turn the wrong way. Playing cards, power saws, gum wrappers, telephones, ladles, cameras, and a multitude of other gadgets are not designed for the left-handed person, and using these items sometimes causes him to appear awkward and clumsy (Ebony, 1984, p. 39). Even though some would argue otherwise, there still is a need to emphasize the importance of handwriting in today's curriculum. Stewig and Nordberg (1995) say that "today's students are increasingly asked to get their thoughts down on paper in all subjects. This surge of interest in written expression has created a new focus on handwriting fluency as a tool." Paying attention to left-handed writers is important since they do require some specific instruction in handwriting.

Many books contain fascinating stories, facts and figures about the quirks of being a lefty, but many are extremely biased against left-handers as evidenced by a book written in 1937 by Cyril Burt called The Backward Child. In it the author describes the personalities of male and female left-handers. Of a left-handed boy Burt says:

> "At times he is visibly of an assertive type, domineering, overbearing, and openly rebellious against all the dictates of authority. But more often his aggressive tendencies are concealed or repressed; and the child belong to a class well-known to practicing psychiatrists and familiarly dubbed by them "obstinate introverts' the dogged adherence to a perverse way of writing symbolizes, as it were, a secret desire to defy all conventions" (Burt, 1937, p. 317).

Burt is just a negative about left-handed girls, saying they

> "....often possess a strong, self-willed, and almost masculine disposition by many little tell-tale symptoms, besides the clumsy management of their hands--by their careless dress, their ungainly walk, their tomboy tricks and mannerisms, they mutely display a private scorn for the canons of feminine grace and elegance" (Burt, 1937 p. 317).

Perhaps one of the reasons such extreme biases have disappeared in recent years is that research has shown that for most people there is some degree of left preference. About ten percent of the American population is left-handed--

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9.7 percent of girls and 12.5 percent of boys (Hawisher, 1987). In fact, International Left-Handers Day is celebrated every August 13th. Parents and teachers are more realistic now and accept children's natural tendencies for left-or right-handedness. In fact, research has shown that there is no significant difference in the quality or speed of left-or right-handed students' writing (Groff, 1963).

History of the word, "left"

Most people realize that the Bible is obviously pro right; in fact, only a few instances are cited in the Old Testament where left has a "good" connotation. In Judges, 700 left-handers helped to save the Benjamites in battle by using their incredible prowess with sling shots (Herron, 1980, p. 7). In another story, Ehud, a notable lefty, was selected by God to free the Israelites from the clutches of the King of Joab. Since, he was left-handed, Ehud strapped a dagger to his right thigh. The king's guards, assuming Ehud was a righty, only frisked his left thigh (where right-handers concealed weapons). Thus, Ehud was able to sneak a weapon in and kill the king, making it possible for the Israelites to free themselves (Silverstein, 1977, p. 25).

However, anti-left sentiment is much more prevalent in the Bible. In the book of Matthew, one can read the tale of God's chosen ones sitting on His right ,while those who have been doomed to be cast out for their sins sit on His left. Reading Ecclesiastes, one comes across, "a wise man's heart is at his right hand, but a fool's heart at his left." Finally, the often-quoted Bible verse, "let not thy left hand know what thy right doeth," sounds as if the left hand is evil and malevolent.

The Bible is not the only place where left-handedness gets a bad rap. One has only to look at the history of the Romans to see a strong pro-right bias. The word "dexterous" which suggests skillfulness, comes from the Latin word for "right." Connotations of the word, right, are usually positive. Some synonyms for right from The Penguin Roget's Thesaurus include: just, correct, dextrality, true, what ought to be, duty,`` decency, normality, conformity, ethical, proper, fair, and about twenty more similar terms. However,
the Latin word for left, sinister, still retains a negative connotation today. The reason the Romans chose this unflattering word is that they always had a pocket on the left side of their togas, and the word they used for pocket was sinus(Bliss, 1980, p. 16). The Romans saluted with their right hands and stepped first with their right foot when entering a building. Thus, the left or sinus side, entered last and came to be associated with shady, covert actions. Since all the Romance languages are derived from Latin, these languages also contain the same biases. The French word, gauche, means left or clumsy and awkward, while the Spanish, zurdo, can also mean malicious. Italian uses the same word for left and defective (Silverstein, 1977, pp.. 8-12). But this bias is not unique to the Romance languages; German uses the same word for left and awkward. The Germanic tribes who invaded England greatly influenced the English language and it was the Germans that really caused left to mean weak and worthless in English (Fincher, 1977, p. 37).

Slang words for left-handedness

Many slang words for left handedness exist. One slang word that comes from Australia is "molly-dooker." Molly means woman or sissy and dooker means fist which translates to sissy-fisted (Bliss, 1980, p. 16). A few lefties, like

James (Gentleman Jim) Corbett, obviously, did not live up to this nickname. The Germans used the term widdershins or withershins for lefties meaning "against the journey of the sun." This word originated from the idea that the sun appears to move in a clockwise direction if you are facing south. Left handers do things opposite from right-handers, hence the idea that lefties move opposite the sun (Silverstein, 1977, p. 16). Another nickname, "hayfoot-strawfoot," did not originate in Prussia (former dominant state of the German Empire formally dissolved in 1947); however, it was the action of a Prussian military leader that inspired the word from the method used by many military leaders to get their farm-boy troops marching on the correct foot. Before the eighteenth century, soldiers marched with their right foot first. Frederich William I of Prussia, however, wanted to instill his troops with more discipline, so he ordered all his men to begin marching with their left foot first. This practice became popular throughout the world and almost every military leader wanted to employ the same tactics used by Frederich William I. But many military leaders had trouble getting their troops to switch their starting foot. One enterprising officer decided to put hay(soft grass) in each recruit's left boot and straw (prickly stalks) in the right boot. Since most of the recruits were farmers, they had no trouble telling the difference between hay and straw. Hence, the expression "hayfoot-strawfoot." Eventually this term became a nickname for lefties (Bliss, 1980,. p. 18). Such nicknames were all less than flattering. There is one name, though, that lefties do not mind being called and that term is "southpaw." Back in the 1890's, a Chicago sportswriter named Charles Seymour was commenting on a left-handed player pitching in a major league baseball game. The Chicago baseball stadium was built so that the sun would not shine in the batter's eyes. This meant that the pitcher faced southwest or west. If he was a lefty, his throwing arm was positioned to the south side of the park. Since Seymour wanted to help the radio audience picture the game, he invented the term southpaw to illustrate that the pitcher was using his left hand to throw the ball (Fincher, 1977, p. 123). Now southpaw refers to all left-handers, not just baseball pitchers.

Reasons for right-handed dominance

All of these nicknames have originated and flourished over many centuries. At one time, however, neither hand was used more frequently than the other, so nicknames for lefties were nonexistent. Stone Age artifacts indicate little or no hand preferences. Tools from the Stone age easily fit either hand, and drawings show early men using both hands to hunt (Blau, 1946, p. 58). Apparently, the Bronze Age initiated the beginning of right-hand dominance. Many theories try to explain this, but none have been proven. Some say that the religious worship of the sun caused the right hand to dominate. Since the sun appears to move in a clockwise manner if one is facing south, right-handedness was associated with good luck. Naturally a person would strive to be right-handed if it meant good luck especially considering the hardships and uncertainties of life in the Bronze Age.

Another reason why the right hand might have become dominate is that the right hand was used to carry hunting weapons so that the left hand could be freed to hold a shield to protect the heart. Primitive man seemed to know that the heart was on the left side of the body so a shield held in the left hand was better protection than one held in the right. This use of the right hand to yield

weapons may have carried over into the use of tools. Using metal to make tools was difficult and time-consuming; therefore, tools made for one hand or the other were passed down through generations (Blau, 1946, p. 61). Since more and more tools were initially made for the right hand, descendants of these tool creators had to use their right hands also. Social pressure to conform might have led to the dominance of righties. It has been hypothesized that all cultures try to prevent needless duplication of equipment so that energies can be spent on better things. As Blau puts it, "all the moral, mythical, ethical, religious, and superstitious cant that has followed since with ever increasing sophistication (of man) emerges as a means of influencing people, of directing their behavior" (Blau, 1946, p. 64). It is interesting to note, however, that not all "civilized" people considered the left hand to be inferior. The ancient Chinese found the left and right hands to be complementary, with neither one considered dominant. Of course this did not hold true through the ages.

Many civilizations have used less than civil means to force their people to use the right hand. The Kaffirs of South Africa buried a left-handed child's hand in the burning sand of the desert to scald it and leave it unfunctional (Durr, 1979, p. 41). In Indonesia, the child's left hand was, and for some still is, bound to discourage its use (Fincher, 1977, p. 59.). The native Indians of North American used this same method, tying the child's left arm to the cradle board so only the right hand could be used (Bliss, 1980, p. 24). Before World War II in Japan, left-handed students were beaten; left men lost all social, economic and political rights of their social class, and left women were unmarriageable. If a woman was clever enough to hide her "sinistrality" until after marriage, her husband had the right to divorce her if he discovered her secret.

The Moslems were known for their extreme anti-left sentiment, but their prejudice had a practical reason. With the shortage of water in the desert, it was harder for Moslems to keep sanitary conditions. Consequently, one hand, the right, was reserved for social functions such as eating from the communal bowl while the left hand was used for cleaning oneself. Any breech of this custom could have serious side effects for all parties involved by spreading germs and disease (Silverstein, 1977, p. 34).

The United States has been far less malevolent toward left handedness than many cultures. Although most of the machines made during the Industrial Revolution were designed for righties, left-handers were tolerated as long as they got their word done. Rural areas and farm children especially were not pressured to conform to the majority. Unfortunately, children in public and parochial schools were pressured to switch to the right by having their hands rapped and by being publicly humiliated. It was not until after the 1900's that researchers began studying the effects of forced hand switching upon people. Some of these effects include difficulty with speech, stuttering and bedwetting (Herron, 1980, p. 60).

Famous lefties

Nonetheless, there have been many famous lefties throughout history. Julius Caesar, a Roman general and dictator, was left-handed even though his country was very pro-right (Bliss, 1980, p. 29). The Inca's most beloved chief, Lioque Yupanqui, was left-handed and his people considered him a wonderful ruler. Alexander the Great conquered most of the known world in the fourth century, B.C., fighting with his left hand. During the Middle Ages, Charlemagne,

the King of the Franks, saved the Pope from invading armies. Charlemagne was then crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 800 A.D.

But adroit fighters are not the only famous lefties. Some of the most artistic people in history have been left-handed. Both Michelangelo, the Italian painter and sculptor, and Leonardo da Vinci were left-handed. Picasso, Raphael Albrecht Durer, and Hans Holbein the Younger were all confirmed southpaws (Silverstein, 1977, p. 38). Besides art, many lefties have excelled in music--Paul McCartney, Ringo Starr, Cole Porter to name a few. Many famous actors, athletes and politicians have been left-handed. There have been a myriad of extremely bright and talented lefties throughout history. (See The Left-Handers' Handbook, 1980, by Mark Bliss and Joseph Morella for a listing of famous left-handers) Of course there have also been many who were poor achievers, slow learners, and "chronic misfits." Two lefties, Jack the Ripper and The Boston Strangler, were two of the most infamous criminals in history. But Scarface, Lee Harvey Oswald , Son of Sam and Charles Manson were right-handed. It seems to be as James Russell Lowell(1819-1891) observed: "Whatever you may be sure of, be sure of this--that you are dreadfully like other people."

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